Torrence Farm: innovative ideas are used in producing quality milk

The sun may not always shine on the Torrence Farm, but when it does it's put to good use.

A solar collection system was installed on the 265-acre dairy farm to help reduce monthly electricity costs. Though still in the test stage, the innovative technique seems to be doing just what it was designed to do–save money.

"After two years, we've found the solar system provides 30 percent of our energy requirement in the winter and 50 percent in the summer," siad Dennis Torrence, farm operator.

The Torrence Farm was one of 10 Virginia farms chosen to participate in a solar research project by Virginia Tech, in cooperation with the U. S. Department of Agriculture and the Department o' Energy.

With Torrence picking up half the cost and the federal government supplying the other half, a demonstration solar system was erected on the farm milking parlor. It now heats water for washing udders and cleaning equipment in the Grade-A milking center.

"It wasn't by chance that this farm was selected as a demonstration site," said James A. Smith, Appomattox County Extension agent. "Dennis is a very progressive farmer who's interested in trying new things. He jumped at the chance to have his dairy used as an on-farm research site."

A former vocational agriculture teacher, 41-year-old Dennis has undoubtedly drawn upon his background and training in the success of the family farm. He graduated from Virginia Tech with a B.S. degree in agricultural education in 1963, then received a master's degree in the same field from the University of Maryland in 1968.

"I enjoyed teaching very much and when I was teaching, the farm was a good way to get my mind off the job. What was once a hobby, has now turned into a business," Dennis explained.

Dennis left teaching after 13 years to return to the family farm and enter into a partnership arrangement with his father, Elliott. "As Dad grew older and the business grew, it was just too much to teach full-time and farm too," he recalled. "Because of the cost involved, I could have never left teaching to go into dairying unles I joined a family operation."

So in 1978, a tradition was continued when Dennis, his wife, Pat, and son, Zane, moved to the farm, becoming the fourth generation of Torrences to farm the same land since 1898.

THE TORRENCE FAMILY–[from left] Dennis, Zane and Pat.

Just this year, Elliott retired from farming, leaving Dennis totally responsible for management of the 50-cow dairy. Since returning to the farm, Dennis started several new practices, resulting in a significant increase in milk production and profits.

"I invested a great deal of money in artificial breeding, using top bulls," he stated. "I also enrolled the herd in the Dairy Herd Improvement Association (DHIA) and put the entire farm operation on the Virginia Agri-Management Association (VAMA) record keeping system."

According to production figures, the management techniques have paid off. The herd is averaging 15,100 pounds of milk–a full 1,000 pounds over a year ago. DHIA projections on the herd two-year-olds call for a predicted 17,200-pound average indicating a bright future for the Torrence Farm.

Another indicator of a bright future is the recent "certified free" brucellosis rating received by the herd. With this rating, the Torrence cattle can move anywhere in the U. S. with few restrictions.

The Torrence success story has been accomplished without impressive buildings or expensive farm machinery. For example, Dennis still milks twice-a-day in a 20-stall stanchion barn built in 1948. "I examined building a modern parlor when I first came back on the farm," he explained, "but it would have cost $45,000 even back then."

Dennis has found the stanchion system to be satisfactory for a herd maximum of 60 cows. "Even in the winter, the barn stays a comfortable 55 degrees, the water never freezes,a nd you can hand-feed the cattle," he said. "It's an easier one-man way of milking and if a cow is not eating well, I can catch it right off. It's hard to do this

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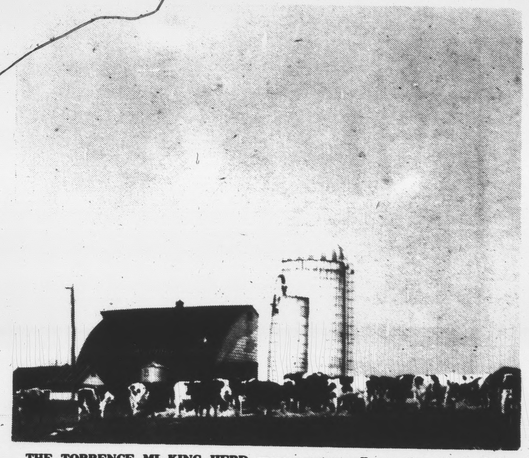
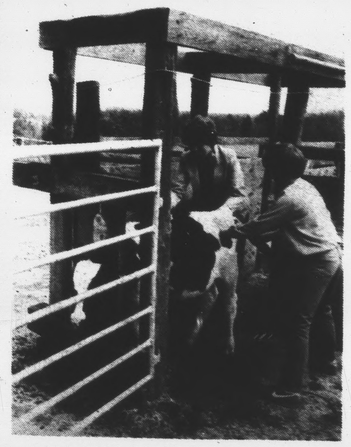


THE TORRENCE MILKING HERD grazes contentedly as they await their afternoon milking call.



PAT AND ZANE ready a calf for a junior livestock show.

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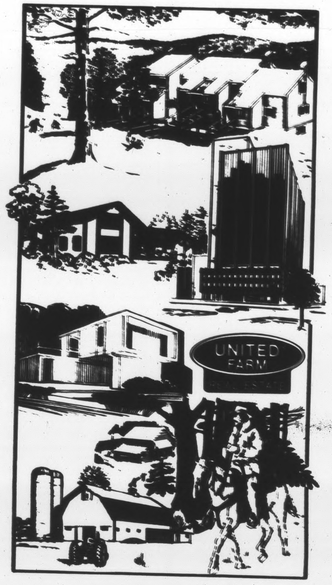

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